10 Infamous Evangelical Scandals

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According to a 2016 report, Evangelical Protestants compose about 17% of the Christian population in the United States of America. On their way to such prodigious (if also dwindling) numbers, their leadership has for decades been rocked by scandal after scandal. Whether it be related to impropriety with money, carnal actions, prejudices, or scandals of a much more abstract nature, a cursory glance through the history of their most exalted will produce no end of examples.

Anyone who paid even the least bit of attention to the news in the early aughts knows that hardly makes them unique among religious groups (or people in general, really) but scandals are often good for news outlets, and when the party involved is a public figure due to religious works, it has the added titillation of hypocrisy. So here's the human side of people that represent a movement that aims to elevate people to a place above mere humanity.

10. Billy Graham's Conversation with Richard Nixon

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jNr0_AUSR0

He may be the most famous Evangelical in the religion's history. Most recently, he entered the news cycle for being the fourth American civilian to lie in honor at the US Capitol. However, there was some controversy over this that largely stemmed from certain recordings.

In 1972, Billy Graham was visiting the White House so that Richard Nixon could offer him, among other things, a job as ambassador to Israel. The conversation unsurprisingly shifted to Jews, then; how they were controlling the media, how they were mostly leftist and were for peace at any price, "except where support for Israel is concerned. The best Jews are actually the Israeli Jews." Among Graham's complaints was accusing the "powerful bloc" of Jews in the media of "putting out the pornographic stuff." Even his personal friends who were Jews were accused of

“swarming” him and sucking up.

Unknown to Graham was that his accusations were being secretly recorded by his host as part of a practice that had actually predated Nixon’s presidency. However, while many recordings in the White House would become world famous in the coming Watergate scandal, the tapes of that particular conversation did not gain public attention until 2002, by which time Graham’s written apology was seemingly enough to quell any religious uproar (the public’s attention having shifted to post-9/11 involvement in the Middle East no doubt helped too).

9. Aimee Semple McPherson

Most of the time, on some level, we have a “that’s what you get, hypocrite” response to scandals breaking. In this case, your sympathies will likely stay with the person at the heart of the scandal. There’s no reason to believe her scandal harmed anyone, intentionally or otherwise.

After being inspired to become a preacher by a prolonged near-death experience from appendicitis in 1913, by 1923 Aimee McPherson had a megachurch following of over 5,000. Her sermons included a large number of performing “gypsies” that supposedly had named her their queen in a fairly tacky display. Still, in 1924, her church reached true “spectacle” level when it incorporated was was then the brand new technology of radio. Then, on May 26, 1926, she disappeared.

On June 20, she was declared dead by her church and a memorial service was thrown with more than a hundred thousand attendees. Three days later she officially returned, her story being that she’d been kidnapped and kept in a cabin and had to escape by walking through the desert. Investigators found a number of holes in her story and the press found the whole matter suspicious (such as coming back from the dead after three days, which sounds suspiciously familiar) and reports that she had been seen out and about while supposedly in captivity. While rumors of her disappearance only being a stunt dogged her for the rest of her career, she still had tens of thousands of people who attended her real funeral in 1944.

8. Impropriety Revenge

In the 1980s, the sensation of televangelism was in full swing, and one of the

bigger names was Jimmy Swaggart, with three thousand stations broadcasting his sermons in 1986. After years of growing his television empire beginning in 1971, though, he apparently felt he was free to say what he wanted about his rivals. One of those was Reverend Martin Gorman, who claimed that Swaggart's accusations of infidelity had held back his career.

Gorman got petty but momentous revenge when he hired private investigator Reed Scott Bailey to trail Swaggart and get some dirt on him. The PI probably got more than he bargained for when he took photos of what were alleged to be Swaggart with a prostitute named Debra Murphee outside a Travel Inn. The fallout was so severe that the Swaggart wasn't just humiliated but defrocked by the Assemblies of God. By the end of 1986, Swaggart filed for bankruptcy while being millions in debt. He still has broadcast ministries working today, but they are naturally a shadow of the powerhouse he once was.

7. David Yonggi Cho's Embezzlement

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tvp3FoKtJ4

Evangelical Protestantism is mostly associated with the United States of America, but it has spread to Asia to a surprising degree. To give some idea just how much, the largest Evangelical megachurch in the world is in South Korea. It's the Yoido Full Gospel, which seats 800,000 churchgoers in Seoul.

Yet in 2017, David Yonggi Cho claimed that there was a "crisis" of decreasing attendance, as people did not seem to be as taken with the church's mixture of prosperity gospel and faith healing. It certainly couldn't have helped that in 2014, he was convicted of embezzling $12,000,000 of church funds. He was fortunate that the sentence was suspended, but it was only going to be a surprisingly brief three years anyway.

6. Paige Patterson on Domestic Violence

In recent years it seems as if an extreme conservative saying something appalling is less a surprise than it is standard practice for free publicity. Even with that in mind, the words by this Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president were vile enough to put off even many of his colleagues. In a manner that recalled Billy Graham's scandal, to an extent, in May 2018 a recording from 2000 of Patterson recounting how he told a wife with two black eyes to pray for her husband instead

of divorcing him (an incident which supposedly resolved happily because the husband attended a service that weekend) led to an uproar that had Southern Baptists scrambling to denounce domestic abuse.

It was consistent with his later words on the subject: In 2013 he said that women with "a problem in their home" should not bring their case before a judge since the judge might have to grant a divorce, which is not becoming of a Christian. Many biblical scholars argue that this view of divorce goes against what's actually prescribed in holy writ. Less defensibly, in 2010 he denounced female seminary students for not being attractive enough, saying, "It's no wonder some of you don't get a second look."

Perhaps Patterson still wouldn't have attracted such attention for his statements on the matter if he hadn't fired a PhD seminary student for criticizing him on Twitter. Whatever a person's views on the intended meanings in scripture, that smacks of abused power. So it's probably not surprising that Patterson doubled down on his words even as he claimed that "allegations have been given on me all my life." Ultimately, he was fired.

5. Calvary Chapel

One of the most successful megachurch operators in recent decades, in 2005 alone Bob Coy's Calvary Chapel church network consisted of 1,800 churches (the Ft. Lauderdale one sat 25,000) and raised $103 million… and that's especially impressive considering he had previously been a strip club manager in Las Vegas until 1981. According to the Miami New Times, at the height of his Calvary Chapel's he had a direct line to the White House through Karl Rove. Yet in 2014, he resigned from the church because of his infidelity and pornography addiction. That was only the smallest aspect of Calvary Chapel's dark underbelly coming to light.

In 2011, a class action lawsuit was filed against the church for the molestation of children by then-youth pastor Anthony Iglesias being covered up. In 2013, it was reported that Chuck Smith, Calvary Chapel's other main founder, was rehiring pastors that had been fired for sexual harassment or even statutory rape. In April 2018, Matthew Tague of the Carlsbad Calvary Chapel was sentenced to 15 years for sexually abusing a minor for two years. But as far as Bob Coy was concerned, in 2017, it came to light that he had been accused in 2014 of sexually abusing a child when she was only 4-years-old and continuing until she was in her teens. The

anonymous teen's mother initially filed the report, which the teen then confirmed, but she later asked the police to destroy the report (which the police told her they legally couldn't do). No charges against Coy were filed and he denied the claims.

4. Covenant Life Church

While the people behind Calvary Chapel always maintained their innocence, in the case of this Maryland megachurch multiple confessions came forth in 2014. In May of that year Nathaniel Morales, former youth pastor, was convicted of molesting three minors between 1983 and 1991. Religionnews.com reported that both Pastor CJ Mahaney and his colleague Joshua Harris admitted that they had been involved in keeping the abuse under wraps.

Mahaney's involvement was especially high-profile as he had been the founder of the Sovereign Graces Ministries, an association of 80 churches. Additionally, Mahaney's brother-in-law Grant Layman admitted in court that he did not reach out to the police about the Morales's crimes despite his moral obligations. Mahaney's confession was no surprise to some, as a lawsuit had been filed against him for covering up the crimes in 2012. For his part, Harris had stated in a 2013 sermon that he himself had been a victim of sexual abuse as a child, which goes to show just how powerful the pressure to keep such crimes under wraps in religious institutions can be.

3. Ted Haggard's Crystal Meth Affair

Compared with the aforementioned crimes, Haggard's was a minor one indeed, but it certainly caused more of a media frenzy when it came to light than earlier entries. By 2006, he had more than 14,000 regular followers at his New Life Church and was president of the National Association of Evangelicals, a position which allowed him to visit the White House repeatedly. That was also the year that it came out that he was visiting a gay prostitute named Mike Jones, who also provided him crystal meth, which of course turned the mainstream Evangelical community against him. He also alienated the gay community by claiming that he only had any gay tendencies because he'd been molested.

At least, that was until 2010, when he resumed preaching along with his wife, who'd stuck with him despite the affair. His new approach focused on, ostensibly, offering verbal conversion therapy. Despite offering the service for eight years,

Haggard told the Wisconsin Gazette that he identified as a bisexual.

2. Jim Bakker's 24 Counts

In the late 1980s, there were a number of scandals that disgraced particularly high-profile televangelists, of which the aforementioned Jim Swaggart was one of the larger examples. Even his scandal was completely overshadowed by Jim Bakker's six-week trial in 1989, which ended with him being found guilty of all 24 counts of fraud, misappropriation of $158 million for Praise the Lord Ministries, and embezzling $3.7 million for personal expenses. Naturally his lawyers appealed the case, but he still lost and was sentenced to 45 years in prison, of which he served six.

Really, no one should have been surprised by Bakker's duplicitousness. In 1980 he had a scandal wherein he both had an affair with Jessica Hahn (who later to become a Playboy model) and wherein he paid $350,000 for her silence. Irony of ironies, Jimmy Swaggart had been one of Bakker's harshest critics at the time for it.

1. Word of Faith Fellowship's Human Trafficking

For sheer number of victims and sustained period of harm, the alleged crimes of this church in Spindale, North Carolina may be unmatched in the history of Evangelism… or at least *hopefully* they would be. Founded in 1979, the church eventually spread internationally. In Brazil, the church began offering to bring congregation members to America.

For more than 20 years, according to an ongoing investigation by the Associated Press (after a 1995 investigation by *Inside Edition*), those Brazilian immigrants were pressed into, essentially, slave labor. They and their children were also physically abused and placed in warehouses. There were even reports of shaken babies. During the investigation, it was also uncovered that there were assistant district attorneys in the congregation that helped coach their peers on how to lie to the police. If there is truth to the accusations, then punishment for this church is long overdue.

Dustin Koski also wrote Not Meant to Know, which is an urban fantasy novel about warring cults.

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